Review

Reviewed Work(s): Long Lives of Short Sagas: The Irrepressibility of Narrative and the Case of Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra by Philip Lavender

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Book Reviews

Long Lives of Short Sagas: The Irrepressibility of Narrative and the Case of Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra. By Philip Lavender. The Viking Collection. Studies in Northern Civilization, 25. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2020. Pp. 401. 21 illustrations. DKK 398.

This is an intelligent and innovative study based on the author's Ph.D. dissertation from the University of Copenhagen. The book is long and rich, much more than a monograph on an individual medieval Icelandic saga, because it deals with other important issues as well. In his foreword, the author quotes a recent article on the role of the case study in the humanities, which is "always in a relation of excess or lack to its *comparandum* or generality" (p. 15). This fits very well with the research project which is presented in his book. It is centered around a text which belongs to a particular group of Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, the *fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda*, which means literally "ancient tales of the Nordic countries." English-language scholars have called them "mythical-heroic sagas" or "legendary sagas." They have in common that their action is staged in the Scandinavian area, or in a few cases the Germanic, and/or that their main characters come from these parts. The events are set in a distant past and the atmosphere of the sagas is heroic and legendary. There are, however, vast differences between the individual texts. Therefore, the study of one case results inevitably in a lack, as it cannot address all aspects of the group which it represents. At the same time, it generates an excess as it reveals the uniqueness of the text under study, as each individual case has features which distinguish it from others. This is certainly true of *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, which, as a legendary saga, is both typical and atypical.

This last sentence is, however, problematic, considering one of the many interesting points that the author makes in his study. Indeed, chapter 5, "Fearless Syntheses: Scholarly Reception and the Development of a Genre," describes how *Illuga saga* came to be associated with the other sagas belonging to the *fornaldarsögur* group. The author traces the genealogy of the grouping, which began with the gathering and publishing of the printed texts of these sagas in the seventeenth century. Subsequent developments culminated in Carl Christian Rafn's influential edition from 1829–30. This has the makings of a fascinating story. The author shows how early editors privileged the common Nordic aspects of the *Illuga saga* material preserved in Icelandic manuscripts, and what they believed to be its historical value, sometimes even modifying the text for that purpose (p. 250). Perhaps the most interesting fact brought to light by the author is that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century editions had already shaped Rafn's approach to this group of texts (pp. 271–73). This makes the genealogy of modern perceptions of this group of texts as a genre longer and more complex. At the same time, the validity of these perceptions can be called into question. Here again, the dialectics of lack and surplus come into play: one could say that *Illuga saga* is lacking, in respect to the motivations of its editors in previous centuries, as the manuscript material needs additions—or surplus—from scholars and editors to fit into their preconceived ideas of the saga and its historicity.

This brings us to the methodology deployed by the author. It combines a painstaking examination of both the manuscript transmission of the saga and its

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scholarly reception through the centuries, with a reflective approach, drawing conclusions from the results of his scrutiny whenever it is possible, while remaining quite honest about their speculative nature. It is in line with the new philological approach inaugurated by Bernard Cerquiglini's seminal 1989 essay, *Éloge de la variante*. Every manuscript is a witness, not only to the text of the work under study, but also to the time, place, and cultural milieu in which it was produced. Moreover, the context created by the manuscript itself, that is, the other texts it comprises, possible illuminations and marginalia it might contain, its preservation and transmission, have also become relevant objects of study. In recent years, several valuable studies on Old Norse-Icelandic literature have resulted from this new way of considering the preservations of literature in manuscripts.

Moreover, the author of this study has been working within a group of scholars led by Matthew J. Driscoll of the Arnamagnæan Institute at the University of Copenhagen, which have enriched the new philological approach with literary-sociological concerns, widening the chronological scope to encompass not only the Middle Ages, but also the Early Modern period, and even the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book under study here is evidence of the fruitfulness of this combined and extended approach, as it sheds light not only on the long and complex history of the transmission of *Illuga saga* and its variants and the scholarship connected to it, but also on the field of Old Norse-Icelandic literary studies in general.

A look at the table of contents shows that the author casts a wide net. He begins with a review of early scholarship on the saga and its links to other manifestations of the same story material in poetry from medieval Scandinavia and the Faroe Islands. This scholarship is mostly preoccupied with the origins of the material, as the conclusions of the respective authors frequently have something to do with where they come from. Lavender acknowledges the value of their work, recognizing the difficulty they face when he states that "the search for origins has a way of shifting the ground beneath one's feet" (p. 63). He is also incisive in his evaluation of their work, which displays "a panoply of both solid analysis as well as questionable conclusions which have hampered perceptions" (p. 69).

The next section is devoted to the manuscript transmission of the saga with its numerous variants. Though painstaking at times, this study is enlivened by information about the scribes and their social environment, when it is available. This makes for an interesting contribution to research on the sociology of readership and literature in late and post-medieval Iceland. It also lays the groundwork for the next two chapters, which display an innovative approach to the literary analysis of the saga and the material associated with it.

Chapter 3 studies the intertextual dynamics of this material, i.e. how the audience's perceptions of the different versions of the story may have been enriched and deepened by the circulation of other related material in the form of other sagas, ballads, or folktales. Though speculative to some extent, it brings the reader to an interesting conclusion, which is to draw attention to the agency of female characters in the narrative. The author develops this intuition further in the following chapter, which contains what many may consider to be the most satisfying part of the book, as it presents a literary interpretation of the *Illuga saga* material. Lavender's reading is too detailed and complex to be summarized here, but it presents the different versions of the saga as "writerly" texts, in the sense given to this term by Roland Barthes, i.e. a text which relies heavily on the play of language and engages the reader in a more active and subtle way in its interpretation.

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This opens up the possibility of multiple readings of the material potentially by different groups of individuals who were exposed to it. A Freudian perspective is suggested with regard to a key episode when the eponymous hero of the saga must brave the violence of "loathly ladies" to get access to sexual pleasures (p. 177). Particularly interesting is his reading of *Illuga saga* from a perspective which reveals a hitherto ignored feminine point of view, laced with wit and irony, and brings to light the extent to which female characters control the narrative and its developments (p. 207–208).

This section is followed by a presentation and discussion of the history of the printed editions and scholarly reception of the saga which has already been mentioned. A final chapter is devoted to the different metrical romances which were composed based on the saga. This leads to considerations about the value of shorter sagas, which were easier to retell in the elaborate and somewhat convoluted form of the *rímur*. The section is quite innovative and should inspire others to work in a similar way on the connections between sagas and metrical romance.

Long Lives of Short Sagas is a deftly composed work which presents a complex research project with a clear sense of direction, never leaving the reader confused about where the author is taking him. It breaks new ground in the study of Old Norse-Icelandic literature by studying the same material in all its manifestations through centuries of different types of transmission and forms of reception. Despite the complexity and size of the book, it is an enjoyable read, and it brings new knowledge and understanding to the student of this literature.

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Gripla Vol. 30. Edited by Haukur Þorgeirsson and Elizabeth Walgenbach. Rit 102. Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 2019. Pp. 281; 23 illustrations. IKK 3,599.

Gripla is an open-access peer-reviewed journal published annually by the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum) at the University of Iceland (Háskóli Íslands). It publishes articles in English, Icelandic, the Scandinavian languages, French, and German on topics within the field of Icelandic and Old Norse studies. The most recent volume (30) was published in December 2019 as part of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies' Rit series, and was edited by Haukur Þorgeirsson and Elizabeth Walgenbach. It comprises eight articles, four in English and four in Icelandic; the contributions are ordered in such a way that those written in English alternate with those written in Icelandic. All articles contain summaries and keywords in both English and Icelandic. The contributions reflect research from scholars located primarily in Iceland, but also Germany and the United Kingdom. The topics range from mythological beings to scribal culture among Icelandic immigrants in North America, and there is a strong emphasis on postmedieval manuscripts, texts, and interpretations of earlier materials and figures.

The first article is by Katelin Parsons, who chronicles the life, career, and influence of Albert Jóhannesson (1847–1921) of Hecla Island, Manitoba, and catalogues the four surviving Canadian manuscripts in Albert's hand: Jóhannesson A-C and NIHM 020012.3301 (an image of which is featured on the journal's cover and in the article itself). Parsons provides a detailed overview of the contents of Albert's manuscripts, with a particular focus on his textual exemplars and how he

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